

Religion as Bane: A Study of 'The Man From Chinnamasta'

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ABSTRACT: India is said to be the largest democracy in the world, evident in the diversity of our nation. India has been called the epitome of the world, as the language, dress and culture vary with area, where gods and goddesses of all religions are venerated. Its physical features are so variegated that it encompasses the mighty Himalayas, deserts, dense forests as well as plains. All types of religious sects such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Maoist, Socialist, Secular and Stalinist are active across Indian nation. This paper will try to delve into the dominant religious ideologies in Assam and how its unbridled perpetuation on the name of propitiating god has proved as bane to the community in large. Indira Goswami, an Assamese writer, with her novel gives a realistic picture of the people suffering on the name of religion.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Superstition, Suffering, Diversity, Culture.

INTRODUCTION:

India is a nation, which has blown the trumpet of its secularism all around the world. However, the religious diversity in India is captivating and admirable only in apparent form because there is not always a pleasant encounter between people of different religions. Since, long ago, it is the biggest impediment before Indian administration to move the nation along the lines of development with peaceful agendas. Such religious antagonism has hiked in the past few years after a

momentous event of our modern history, the division of the subcontinent into two separate sovereign nations, India and Pakistan. It besmeared the nation into ghastliness by shattering all modes of decency, nobility and humanistic values.

The Hindu-Muslim hostility wafted at first from the British Machiavellian thirst to grab power and later became the biggest threat to the two sovereign nations. Many intellectuals have given renditions to such issues in their writings. Apart from this international issue, there are many regional problems in India regarding religion. As there are many practices which tarnished the very concept of religion and only tend to aggravate the agony of people, by working only on the premises of superstition, false notions and concocted myths. Indira Goswami, an Assamese writer, directs our attention to one such practice in her much celebrated as well as controversial novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2006). Indira Goswami's other works include *Pages Stained with Blood* (2001), *An Unfinished Autobiography* (1988), *The Shadow of Kamakhya* (2002) and *Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker* (1980) also deal with this aspect. In her earlier novels she puckered her brows at the socio-political conditions of North-East region as well as very considerate towards the predicament of tribal women in caste-ridden society. It is with the novel *The Man from Chinnamasta*, Indira Gosawami has given stronger jolt to the religious sentiments of the devotees of Kamakhya Devi. This novel gives ventilation to Goswami's pent-up fury, smoldering for so long. Kamakhya Devi is the only temple in India where people sullies their hands with Animal blood to propitiate the goddess Kamakhya. This temple is situated on a hillock, Nilachal, between the airport and Guwahati city in Assam. The river Brahmaputra flows in its opposite direction, adds to the scenic beauty of this place.

Kamakhya is the main temple in a complex of individual temples dedicated to the ten mahavidya's: Kali, Tara, Sodashi, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, Matangi and Kamla. Among these, Tripura Sundari, Matangi and Kamala reside inside the main temple where as the other seven reside

in individual temples. It is an important pilgrimage destination for general Hindu and especially for tantric worshippers. (Shin 4)

The legend enumerates that Daksha organized a big yaga to which his daughter Sati and her husband Shiva were not invited, because Daksha was infuriated with her daughter for getting married against his will. However, Sati appeared on the scene which adds fuel to Daksha's fury and he used very disgracing words against Shiva. Sati infuriated by this, submitted herself to the yaga fire. Shattered by the death of his wife, Shiva started the dance of annihilation by carrying Sati's dead body on his shoulders. All the gods seemed aghast by the act, entrusted Vishnu to placate Shiva. He followed Shiva and began to cut the dead body into pieces with his weapon, Sri Chakra. Those parts fell at some fifty one places which later came to be recognized as holy. The genitalia fell at the Nilachal hill where a temple known as Kamakhya Devi established (Kakati, (1989)). The inner Sanctum of the temple, known as Garbhagriha is below ground level and it comprises no image but a rock fissure in the shape of a yoni:

The Garbhagriha is small, dark and reached by narrow steep stone steps. Inside the cave there is a sheet of stone that slopes downwards from both sides meeting in a yoni-like depression some 10 inches deep. This hollow is constantly filled with water from an underground perennial spring. It is the vulva shaped depression that is worshipped as the goddess Kamakhya herself and considered as most important pitha of the Devi. (Shin 29)

The yoni shaped rock inside the cave is constantly moistens by a small hidden spring of water. This water turns reddish for three days, each year, known as Ambubachi or the period of the Goddess's menstruation. Though for women, menstruation occurs once in a month but since she is mother Earth it happens to her once in a year. For these three days in a year the temple doors remain close for the devotees. During these three days the Ambubachi fair is organized and it is also the time for rigorous fasting for Brahmin widows. The surroundings resonated with the

fanfare and preparations. The doors opened on the fourth day for the pilgrims. If we speculate over the origin of the temple we would discern that it is steeped more in legend than in history. The ritual of animal sacrifice has been continuing since long and is considered the best way to worship goddess even now. Despite being so much awareness and provisions regarding animal protection and reservation, the practice of animal sacrifice in Kamakhya temple is unbridled.

Indira Goswami in her novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* has not only given rendition to the ritual of animal sacrifice in Kamakhya Devi temple but also does copious efforts to curb this game of blood on the name of religion. Indira Goswami belongs to the upper Brahmin family in Assam. Assam and other North-Eastern states have to abide numerous socio-political and economic adversaries. Although, India is becoming digital but few parts of the country are yet untouched by any form of development, whether it is education, technology, employment, or medical facilities. Tribes of various parts of India are still combating to get out of the tangles of abject penury. Indira Goswami has volunteered to uphold the issues and demands of North-Eastern people. All of her writings captures either the socially deprived people or focused on the bewilderment of women in patriarchal society.

The novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* can be said to have been inspired by an incident in Indira Goswami's life. As after the death of her father, her mother despite being all her efforts failed to get a suitable match for Indira Goswami. After that her mother looked at Tantriks for the solution and one of them suggested her to sacrifice a goat at Kamakhya temple to propitiate her hostile stars. But that ghastly incident of sacrifice etched with a red hot skewer in her head, as her feelings are enumerated in her first autobiography *Life is no Bargain*:

... My mind bled in agony at the fate of the goat grazing over there freely at the moment. And no sooner had a priest gone out with a falchion in hand, then my cheeks were flooded in tears. Then, all on a sudden, I know not how it happened, I found myself crying aloud

disconsolately in the temple. Everyone was shocked, i heard some outcry of grief and pain: “This be an ill omen, sure. It forebodes evil”, the voice declared in anger and protest. I felt a shivering, worm sensation as some one put on my forehead a blob of thick blood from the sacrifice goat.

For many a following day, I felt this strange sensation of warm blood, and a practice of scouring my forehead became a sort of embarrassing habit for me, not to be easily overcome,

As regards my marriage, even after the propitiation of vagala, it remained an illusive prospect. (GoswamiMamoni 14)

It is this experience of animal slaughter at Kamakhya Devi temple which stimulated her to jot down the novel like The Man from Chinnamasta. This novel is not just scribble to expound over the rituals and festivals at Kamakhya temple but with a wider agenda to wash the blood spattered in the sanctum of the temple forever. This novel was published in 2006 but set in pre-independence British Assam. Its setting during colonial rule tinged the novel with more pathetic descriptions, as the tribal people had to bore multiple tyrants and everything seems just to aggravate their predicament. It is with the central character, an ascetic; ChinnamastaJatadhari the writer’s intentions are articulated. Indira Goswami highly censures the ritual of animal sacrifice with the character of ascetic Jatadhari. Jatadhari resides near the temple, meditates and does his veneration of various goddesses to stop animal sacrifice in the temple. He had many devotees and his character is described by Goswami as:

To his devotees, ChinnamastaJatadhari was a conundrum. His knowledge of history was extensive, the languages he knew were many. This only fuelled the wild speculation that swirled around him. Stories about his origin were perpetually in circulation, some claimed he was a brilliant scholar from Benaras. Others believed he had been

educated in the Tanjore district of South India. Still others had no doubt that he originally, belonged to the Trihut region of Bihar. (8)

Ratnadhar is another character, who is an artist and the strongest disciple of Jatadhari. He was the eldest son of Manmohan Sarma, renowned priest of the sacred Kamakhya mutt, an important shaktipeeth. Ratnadhar is most sensitive to this practice of animal sacrifice, as he lost his senses when a buffalo was dragged to the sacrificial altar:

He threw himself down, scrabbling frantically at the earth, flecks of foam gathering at the corners of his mouth. “Stop! Stop! Don’t you see? Its terrified, it doesn’t want to go with you. See how it defecates in fear. Look at its eyes. Have some mercy on the Beast. It wants live and play on Ma’s Earth. Stop I say! Stop!”.... The hoof beats pounded hard in Ratnadhar’s chest, the eddies of sound cursing through his body like hot blood. He beat at the ground with his fists. (10)

There were many tantriks in the temple and many tribals who despise Jatadhari by considering his efforts as sacrilege. But there were many others who greatly admire him as an ascetic. Jatadhari with his repeated incantations, meditation and by applying some herbs help Ratnadhar to become more rational being and a proficient artist. Ratnadhar and Bidhibala develop affinity towards each other when she came from Saulkuchi with her family to the Chinnamasta temple to perform sacrificial rites. Although, the whole village was groaning under poverty but the excruciating pain of women had racked their bodies. Even the beauty like fresh milk of Bidhibala has been ravaged by the social and religious ills, as indicated in the conversation between Deba and Bishnupuriya, when Bishnupuriya is told by Deba as

I hear her marriage has been arranged. The groom is from the North bank. Owns four or five granaries. Plus two wives. He’s well past his prime. Must be over forty. Oh! The girl is like a mermaid!

“Someone started rumour- that she had already begun to menstruate. So they were frantically looking around for a groom. Some Brahmins who had come back from coochbehar came forward.” (83)

Such puritanical attitude towards teenage girls is the most putrid thing of any social or religious institution. Bidhibala too despises the blood smeared altars of the temple and on seeing the painting of buffalo sacrifice by Ratnadhar, in which

Six or seven men were pulling at the ropes. The collar around its neck had split. The animal was desperately trying to break free. It was emptying its bowels. The terrified eyes. Pitchers of water splashed on its neck. Tremors wracked its body. “It wants to live! Oh Ma let it live...” Bidhibala moaned in pain before she went plummeting down the stairs. (100)

When she saw the calf brought by her father to sacrifice for her sake, because her marriage has been fixed, she becomes restless. She overcomes all her trepidation and infracts such antagonistic religious taboo by unleashing the calf with the help of Ratnadhar. The novel seems to take another angle with the appearance of the character of an English woman Dorothy Brown, who came to Jatadhari for mental piece after being betrayed by her husband, Henry Brown, principal of Cotton College. The purpose of setting the story in the nineteen thirties during British rule serves the writer’s desire of etching the attitude of the colonial masters. The depiction of British characters is not in stereotypical manner but some of them show sympathy and love towards the natives. However, Henry Brown and many others are typical pukka sahibs as they practice shooting with much indifference towards the religious sentiments of people, as the carcasses of birds fell at the temple precincts. Henry Brown is one, who is very ostentatious about the colonial ways. He gets extremely infuriated when Dorothy forsakes him because of his extra-marital affair with a Khasi woman and goes to the vicinity of Jatadhari. His reaction was typical colonialist as “Henry exploded. Dorothy’s absurd decision to come and live here in this fashion wasn’t just a slap on his face. “It was an affront to the empire, their

Britishness, their heritage.” (35) This thing tormented him to the inner core, and in a fit of rage, he later murdered Dorothy. Foil to Henry’s character, Dorothy Brown, a bruised soul, starts abiding Darbhanga House. Though many tantriks opposed to allow someone of British origin to ascend the precincts of temple but Jatadhari roared that there are only five rules of initiation: “Do not initiate a sinner, an evil-doer, a person with no respect for mantra, a person with no respect for a teacher, and one with a stained soul” (15). So, Dorothy joined Jaradhari’s disciples and played an active role in Jatadhari’s signature campaign to eradicate the animal sacrifice. However, the affinity between Jatadhari and Dorothy give way to rumors of a love affair between them. But such things don’t obfuscate their mission.

Indira Goswami maintains her plot around the Kamakhya temple and comprises incidents of animal sacrifice every now and then. The common thing in most of the sacrifices is that, they are performed by those who are living at the hem of afflictions. They are oblivious and ignorant to decipher that, how can such heinous acts help them to get rid of their evil stars. There are evidences scattered everywhere in the novel where people with skin and bones dragging buffalos and goats on the sacrificial altar. They stake their whole money in performing such sacrifices, which rip-apart their assiduously re-structured life. The most repugnant and soul shattering incident is of Pulu’s encounter with Dorothy Brown. Pulu’s son Gajen is diagnosed with tuberculosis, but he was not left with single penny to get his son treated. On the advice of Dabeshwar Sharma, Pulu reached Dharbhanga House to seek Dorothy’s assistance. His condition is very heart rendering as he beseeches before Dorothy; “Pulu lifted his hands. Dorothy had never in her most terrifying nightmares seen human hands quite so disfigured. Are those the hands that beat the drum? The gnarled veins stood out like dried and cursed intestines” (41). Pulu was helped by Dorothy but to no avail as his son died after some days. The news that Dorothy helped Pulu instigated many robbers and hunger-smitten people to rob everything from her but somehow she saved her life. There are incidents where people unable to sacrifice animals due to lack of money, sacrifice their own blood. During Deodhwani festivities some pilgrims dance on the edge of an unseathed sabre on the very floor of the Goddess’s abode and drink the blood of a dove; the

symbol of peace. Earlier the human sacrifice was as prevalent as animal sacrifice in the temple but it was stopped after it was legally suppressed in 1835. A hermit from Torsa quotes KalikaPurana regarding human sacrifice:

Come forward. The scriptures say that all you need are two drops of blood on a lotus petal. Just two drops from your own body. Come, come. Anyone, who offers a bit of flesh, the size of a sesame seed, from his chest will have all his desires fulfilled within six months. A tiny scrap of flesh from the chest. (94)

Jatadhari, his devotees and students from the tol came up with the new and pleasant interpretation of KalikaPurana and swayed the audience with their assertions. Jatadhari instructs the volunteers to have a signature campaign by going house to house on the north and south banks ask people if they have found any peace from having sacrificed another's life for the sake of their own. The story is given an interesting tinge with the short love affair between Ratnadhar and Bidhibhala. With the character of Bidhibhala, Goswami has pricked the wounds of social pestilence. Bidhibhala is a child widow, and the life of a widow in that society was worse than animals. When her marriage had been fixed, her family came to temple to perform sacrificial rites, but Bidhibhala gets agitated at the very thought of killing an animal. She prays to the goddess to take her life and spare the animal. So, she solicits Ratnadhar to let loose the buffalo tied on sacrificial altar. Ratnadhar had done this clandestinely many times and cites that "lookup the twenty fifth incantation of the sixty seventh chapter of the KalikaPurana. The white gourd, melon, sugarcane and alcohol are as dear to the goddess as goat's blood" (105). The disappearance of buffalo was taken as a sign of misfortune and the proclamations of Bidhibhala's brother Singhadatta shows how myopic people were towards the concept of religion, as he avers, "A buffalo has disappeared. I, Singhadatta will bring ten more buffaloes for ten-armed mother. I shall wash her feet with blood for Bidhibhala's sake" (118). He further adds that he will manage these ten buffaloes even at the cost of his entire land. Bidhibhala finds an escape from all this turmoil in Shekhadari, the house of prostitutes. There she died repenting over the slaughter of animals done by her

family. When her body brought to the temple, Ratnadhar cried out. “Bidhibhala, they made a sacrifice of you instead of the buffalo” (156). Ratnadhar’s lamentations urged others to wail over their fate, for they had spent their last rupee on animal offerings and now they are in more deprived state with no hope to cling on. It seems that more than devotion it was out of fear that people carries on with this game of blood. This fear gets firmed with raucous voices of tantriks, as one of them shrieked against Jatadhari and his disciples, and everything was in delirium:

You fools! The goddess Kamakhya has quenched her thirst for thousands of years with blood of both humans and animals. Haven’t you heard that Ganesha is venerated with liquor, Vishnu with clarified butter, Shiva with music and Chandika with blood? Are you not familiar with intricacies of tantric ritual? You dare to change the practice of millennia! You will rot, rot in hell!”(182)

But people exhausted with futile sacrifices joined the petition, which was an impassioned plea, written with the blood of Ma’s devotees. Just before the petition was submitted, a cluster of tantriks intervenes to ask Jatadhari to substantiate his devotion to ‘Maa’ by sacrificing his own blood and flesh from below the navel. Jatadhari do not feel reluctant for a while and the scene that followed is actually the crust of the novel as;

Hundreds of devotees standing behind him choursed, “MA! Ma! Ma!” The sky above the holy abode resounded with their cry. The doves plastered to the walls of the temple rose in a flurry. Students from the Tolsteeped forward. With the same weapon, the youth began to cut flesh from their bodies. They continued through the night. The sacrificial altar was drenched in the blood of young men....

Towards early dawn, the clouds burst. The rain came down. It carried away the raw blood with all the other rubbish and swept it into the bosom of the Brahmaputra.

In the morning, the sun rose once more. In the clear light of day,
no one could see a trace of blood. Not a single bloodstain remained.
(186)

The obliteration of blood stains from the precincts of Kamakhya temple is a kind of dream came true for Indira Goswami and all her plight seems to evaporate.

The way Indira Goswami accentuated the tarnished side of North-Eastern society in her this novel as well as in other novels, seems that the whole system there is in dire need to be recuperated. The abode of God is always taken as a place to seek solace and as a power to uplift the despondent souls. In contrast, the religious practices at few places seems tormenting as evident in the cases where people walk on burning coals or assail themselves with hunters just to propitiate the gods and goddesses. It has been exercised not only in Kamakhya but in other countries as well, where animals are being slaughtered due to some ill rituals. Indira Goswami's concern in this novel is to lay bare sinister designs of authority bearers. Throughout the novel there are instances where people exhausted with the delusive religious consolations attempts to renounce animal sacrifice in the Kamakhya temple. However, various pandas and tantriks over there proclaimed it as havoc on the earth. They cite 'KalikaPurana' time and again to avouch their points but with Jatadhari's interpretation of 'KalikaPurana', it becomes explicit that the practice of animal sacrifice is fabricated by tantriks just to facilitate their income. It seems that all the educated youth stood by the side of Jatadhari where as uneducated tribals believe in the words of those imposter tantriks. These tantriks succeed in their attempts on the premises of Goddess's wrath, which will wrought wreckage around the world if not satiated with blood. According to Indira Goswami, this fear can be conquered with the saber of education, which will urge people to be rationale enough to scrutinize the epithets of any form of religion. It happened in the case of Christianity, as it was only after the growth of literacy in Europe and the translation of Bible into English, that people became aware of the corruption of clergy, who used to feigned people by false teachings of Bible. The problem with the present world is that, science and technology enamored people towards modernity, but this

modernity is gained at the cost of inner peace and tranquility. It just produces docile bodies, as substantiated by Moshumikandali in his story ‘ravan_1020@fantasy.com’ with the character of ChitrabhanuMazumdar. He longed for the bright, pulsating and serpentine glitter of the city life leaving behind the rural life of dense forest and mysterious hills. Like others, technology metamorphosed him into a docile body and at the end, he is left alone by the window of a tiny flat in a:

... huge apartment like an enormous earth-worm cast jabbing into the dark grey sky. In this modern vertical alley that he lives in, even dogs do not bark. Neither dogs nor men- this is the land of silence. Each square residence-like rows of boxes. In each closed box a life in a whirl-apparently self-absorbed-cut off like an island in the sea of people. (Kandali 110)

Such seclusion bereft of all types of companionship is the most severe repercussion of the age of utilitarianism and virtual reality. These aggrieved souls quest frantically for the inner contentment and seek ways through meditations, yogic exercises and various kinds of austerities. People, after getting tired of the virtual world, groped for anything on the name of religion. As a result, religion has become a commodity and many absconders subterfuge under saffron guises to advocate pseudo spiritualism. India is suffused with such imposters. However, the greatest dilemma of our nation is that, despite being well educated, many people swarm at the feet of swindlers. Their scandals are often exposed but their followers remain adherents as in the case of Asharam, Rampal, Nirmal baba, DhanDhanSatguru, Radhema and many more. Whenever, these so called babas are investigated and interrogated, they are exposed as womanizers, with huge armaments and dealers of various inebriating items. Such blind faith in any such religious institutions will pull over country into a quagmire. There is a dire need to understand that humanity and morality are the only postulates of true religion. In order to get established in the moral form of life, one requires what Kierkegaard calls the “transformation of our whole subjectivity”. To be morally motivated is not just to do the right thing in a given situation, but to be settled in a state of mind such that the right conduct simply

flows from it. As religious vision is inseparable from spiritual experience and the authenticity of the latter is guaranteed by the moral transformation that ensues. Mahatma Gandhi has rightly put forward about this moral transformation as:

It may entail continuous suffering and the cultivating of endless patience. Thus step by step we learn to make friends with all the world: we realize the greatness of God or Truth. Our piece of mind increases in spite of suffering, we become braver and more enterprising ...our pride melts away, and we become humble ...the evil within us diminishes from day to day (The Spiritual and Moral 111).

CONCLUSION: A morally motivated life is the most sacred life and the humanity or cosmopolitanism that follows are its religious teachings. Humanity should be the universal religion which will eradicate all types of hostility around the world. This novel successfully portrays the annihilating as well as alleviating power of religion, so one should be very rational in its practice. Novels like *The Man from Chinnamasta* can help people to come out of dormancy and delve into the matters to abstain from pseudo and threatening religious practices. So, the theme scintillating throughout the novel can be well comprehended with the closing lines of the poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as:

He prayeth Best, Who loveth best

All things both great and small

For the dear God who loveth us,

He made and loveth all.

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